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ABSTRACT

This study explored the spiritual development of college women, to gain an understanding of what religion, spirituality, and faith mean to them. Interviews with three college women explored issues critical in their religious lives, revealing the emergence of their faith and religious identities. The three were entering their fourth year at a large, public research university and belonged to an intergenerational group exploring issues of Christianity and feminism. The women tell stories of how they have come to integrate the dominant, external perception of Christianity with their own internal, personal understanding of Christianity. Each of the women talked about the need for information, for arguments in support of their new ideas, and for ways to discuss ideas such as feminism and social justice within Christianity. Each of the women was working to integrate faith into every aspect of their lives. Findings suggest that the women were struggling to integrate the public understanding of faith and Christianity with their internal beliefs about what it means to be a feminist Christian. The use of narrative is presented as a valuable research methodology in higher education research and more specifically as an appropriate method for studying a topic such as faith development. (Contains 52 references.) (JDD)

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"How Can My Faith Be So Different?" The Emergence of Religious Identity in College Women

Presented at the Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Meeting
Tucson, Arizona
November 11, 1994

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Doubletree Hotel, Tucson, Arizona, November 10-13, 1994. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

PREFACE

> The questioning had to do with how can my faith be so different from other people's? And can these be reconciled? You know, can I call myself a Christian if this person believes this and calls himself a Christian, that sort of thing.
>
> *Caitlin: Tell me about that ...*
>
> Okay. I'm very far to the left and so I have a lot of problems with the religious right. And how can I be a Christian if they're saying they're Christians? That would be where the problem is ... And, you know, if they claim they're right and I'm claiming I'm right, that's a problem ... but they have their denominations and I can go to a different one ... (M-3-18/19)[1]

I had asked Margo to tell me about the "questioning" she kept mentioning, assuming that she meant questioning the existence of God. Margo's answer stuck with me. I realized that the answers to her questions lead to others that would provide a framework for this study. What is her faith different from? Why is it different? As we've just heard, Margo is questioning how her faith can be so different from that of conservative Christians. However, the sentiment behind this haunting question, "how can my faith be so different?" is a common theme for the three women I interviewed. Why is my faith different than my family's? How is it different as a woman? As a young adult? Is this "just a phase" as my family's friends tell me? Can I be a feminist and a Christian? Is it possible to be liberal politically but conservative religiously?

As I listened to the three college women whose voices are heard in this study, it became apparent that exploring answers to these and other similar questions was critical in their religious lives. Diane, Margo and Rose shared their faith and life stories (Leann, 1980) with me and through these stories, we hear the emergence of their faith and religious identities.

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[1] My notation for direct quotations indicates either Margo (M), Diane (D) or Rose (R), which interview the quote came from and the page number. This was Margo's third interview and the quote is found on pages 18 and 19 (M-3-18/19).

INTRODUCTION

The Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1949) states that "the concept of education is broadened to include attention to the student's well-rounded development--physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually--as well as intellectually" (p.1). With this in mind, I chose to study the spiritual development of college women.

The field of higher education (literature, research, and practice) tends to neglect the spiritual aspect of students' lives. Roof (1993) and other sociologists of religion have noted that people tend to leave organized religion in late adolescence or early adulthood and not return until children reach an age for moral or religious education. This is also confirmed in research which suggests that a student's religious beliefs are divested as the individual begins to identify and clarify core spiritual values (Stage & Kuh, 1992). However, on most of our campuses, there are active campus ministry programs of many denominations. These programs provide students with opportunities to examine and often question their spiritual understandings and commitments.

The project described here is my current dissertation research. The purpose of the study was to explore the spiritual development of three college women, to gain an understanding of what religion, spirituality and faith mean to them. Descriptive narrative research methods (Personal Narratives Group, 1989) provided the best way to approach a study such as this. While it is not possible here to present my entire research project, this paper will introduce the

themes and stories that are emerging as these women describe their spiritual journeys. In addition, I will describe how the use of narrative research methods can be used in higher education research to gain a deeper understanding of student development.

The first section of this paper, describes the theoretical context that frames this study. My "feminist lens" influenced each stage of the project. Next the three participants whose voices are heard throughout this paper will be introduced. This study would not have been possible if they had not agreed

to share their stories and reflections about faith and spirituality with me. A description of the methods used during the project for data collection and analysis follows. My preliminary findings suggest that these young women are struggling to integrate the public understanding of faith and Christianity with their internal beliefs about what it means to be a feminist Christian. Throughout college, their faith journeys continued, presenting them with challenges and opportunities. The findings will be followed by a discussion of the implications of not only these findings, but of conducting this type of research on this topic for both higher education researchers and college and university personnel.

CONTEXT

Connections between several ideas establish the context and frame this study: my commitment to the study of women's development, feminist standpoint epistemology, the use of narrative methodology, and my substantive interest in faith development.

Context Recent studies in women's development have emphasized giving voice to women's perspectives. This is particularly evident in the works of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1985, 1986) and Gilligan (1982). These authors have demonstrated that research grounded in women's perspectives and experiences can provide new and more appropriate ways of understanding women's moral development and ways of knowing. The interest of researchers such as Gilligan and Belenky *et al* comes as a reaction to traditional developmental theories. Commonly accepted theories, such as those developed by Kohlberg (1971) and Perry (1968), were based primarily on empirical studies of men's experiences, and do not sufficiently address women's experiences or concerns. These critiques are also important for the study of college student development since Kohlberg and Perry have been two of the major theorists used in student development research. The need for additional research on gender as it impacts student development has been noted (Stage, 1989, 1991) and women's voices and ways of knowing provide

models for new research agendas with college students.

The research of Gilligan (1982) and Belenky and colleagues (1986) is representative of a feminist standpoint which argues that women's perspectives have been neglected in traditional research (Harding, 1987). According to Harding (1987), a feminist standpoint understands and interprets the world from the perspective of women's lives. Feminist researchers thus design studies that emphasize "giving voice to women's perspectives ... identifying the ways in which women create meaning and experience life" (Riger, 1992, p.734). The nature of questions such as the meaning and experience of women's lives calls for the use of interpretive methods which are "sensitive to the subtle nuances of voice, language, and perspective, open to possibilities that the text can be read in several ways" (Tappan & Brown, 1989, p.196). This proposed study will ask similar questions about college women's experiences though focusing primarily on questions of faith and spiritual development. A feminist standpoint epistemology will provide the best framework from which to begin this type of research.

In conducting research from a feminist standpoint it is necessary for me to recognize and assess my role as a researcher (Harding, 1987; Reinharz, 1979). This was done through journalling, the use of a peer debriefer, memos to myself, and conversations with campus ministers. By choosing to use interpretive methods, I was also an active participant in the process of understanding the stories of the women interviewed (Personal Narrative Group, 1989; Tomm, 1989).

Feminist researchers across disciplines have adopted narrative as their chosen methodology (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). The use of narrative methodology is particularly appropriate for giving voice to women's experiences and lives:

> Since feminist theory is grounded in women's lives and in society, women's personal narratives are essential primary documents for feminist research. ... the act of constructing a life narrative forces the author to move from accounts of discrete experiences to an account of why and how the life took shape as it did. (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p.4)

Narrative is a valuable tool in social science research, as MacIntyre (1984) suggests:

> It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in

terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. (p.212)

Recent studies of moral development also make use of narrative interpretive methodology. Moral development research conducted by the Stone Center has shown that people often choose to tell stories about moral choices (Tappan & Brown, 1989, 1992). Tappan (1991) suggests that there is "an intrinsic connection between narrative and human experience" (p.8). Narrative allows for the inclusion of explanation and context as an integral part of the data.

Substantive interest Having documented the increased attention to women's development and the use of narrative methodology, I can now turn to my substantive area of interest, the spiritual development of college women. There is emerging recognition that spirituality is an important, if overlooked aspect of development (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992; Collins, Hurst, & Jacobson, 1987; Genia, 1990). In the counseling field, Chandler, Holden, and Kolander (1992) have developed a model that focuses on spirituality as a central dimension of wellness. One of the guiding documents for student affairs work assumes that to become properly educated means to include "attention to the student's well-rounded development--physically, socially, emotionally, and *spiritually*-- as well as intellectually" (American Council on Education, 1949, p.1, emphasis added). However, the topic of spiritual development rarely receives attention in the higher education literature and research (Collins, Hurst, & Jacobson, 1987; Genia, 1990). Collins, Hurst, and Jacobson (1987) suggest that "principles and strategies should be adopted to address spirituality in student development" (p.276, emphasis added).

Women's spiritual development, in particular, is emerging as an area of study in theological literature. Specific studies have explored biblical feminism (Cooney, 1985; Cooney Cripe, 1989), gender and faith development in a Catholic college (White, 1985), women's ways of knowing in faith stage assignment (DeNicola, 1992) and adult women's faith experiences (Ierardi, 1990). This study adds to the above mentioned literature by focusing specifically on college women's spiritual development. In

addition, the site of the study is a public university, where topics such as these are rarely addressed.

One approach to studying spiritual development has been developed by Fowler (1974, 1981, 1986). His cognitive-structural stage theory of faith development is one of the most frequently referred to in related theological literature. Parks (1980, 1986) provides one example of spiritual development research with college students. In The Critical Years (1986), she reported the results of indepth interviews which were used to determine whether Fowler's (1981) theory of faith development could be appropriately applied to young adults.

Current research in the development of spirituality, however, exhibits several shortcomings. These are: the neglect of women's experiences in Fowler's research, a concern with the methodology utilized to determine stage placement, and a concern about contested definitions. Of primary concern to me is that neither Fowler (1981) nor Parks (1986) included "the woman question" (Bensimon, 1989, p.145) in their respective models. These theories of faith development rely heavily on earlier developmental theories, such as Perry and Kohlberg, that have recently been the subject of feminist critique (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). The recent research on women's spiritual development (Cooney, 1985; Cooney Cripe, 1989; Ierardi, 1990) begins to address this shortcoming. DeNicola (1992) has actually proposed incorporating women's ways of knowing into the understanding of faith development stages.

The second critique has to do with Fowler's research methodology. The scoring manual for faith development research (Moseley, Jarvis, & Fowler, 1986) suggests that "faith development theory takes seriously the narrative structure of life history" (p.4). Although narratives are elicited in the interviews, they are analyzed according to predetermined stages of development. Dykstra (1986) also suggests that we consider the idea of "faith biography" rather than the structural stage development of faith. Since narratives often function to help people make meaning of their lives (Bruner, 1986) it is valuable to analyze the elicited narratives as such rather than using them for stage placement.

And finally, definitions of terms such as faith, spirituality, and religion are unclear and contested in both the popular and theological literature (Conn, 1989; Dykstra & Parks, 1986; Roof, 1993). Instead of establishing a concrete definition for each term before starting this research, one of my goals was to articulate an understanding of the meaning given to these terms by the particular group of women who participated in this study.

Because of the shortcomings previously mentioned, this study used narrative methodology in a feminist framework in order to explore the spiritual development of college women. The respondents in this study are self-identified explorers; women who are reflective and interested in sharing with me their stories and exploring their own spiritual development. Listening to my respondents allowed me to develop an interpretation of the spiritual development of college women.

The purpose of this study was thus to explore the spiritual development of college women. Descriptive narrative research techniques (Polkinghorne, 1988) provide not only the most appropriate method of exploring a topic such as faith development, but an important way of focusing on women's experiences (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Analysis followed guidelines from interpretive social science and narrative analysis (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986; Tappan & Brown, 1992).

As stated in The Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1949) it is important to pay attention to the spiritual needs and development of students, along with the cognitive, psychosocial, and physical aspects of growth. Faith, however personally defined, is a lens that influences how students learn, see the world, interact with others, and develop through their college years. This study provides an understanding of the spiritual development of college women by listening to their own stories and voices.

DIANE, MARGO AND ROSE

The participants in this study are three college women who shared with me their reflections over

close to a twelve month period (June 1993-May 1994). Before proceeding with a description of the methods used and my analysis, I would like to introduce you to Diane, Margo and Rose. At the time of our interviews, all three had just turned 21 years of age and were entering their fourth year at Midwestern University, a large, public research university. The Campus Ministry Center (the Center), an ecumenical church on campus, is where each has found a spiritual home. Kathryn, a feminist campus minister at the Center has become an important role model for all three women. In addition, Diane, Margo, and Rose all belong to Women's Group, an intergenerational group exploring issues of Christianity and feminism.

DIANE: *"Trying to get it to all make some kind of sense."* (D-3-16)

Diane refers to herself as a "coal miner's daughter" who "found out she was working class" when she came to college. Although raised in a very small conventional town, she has come to reject what she refers to as the role of the traditional woman. The oldest of three children, she is majoring in English and Japanese, and being certified to teach secondary education as well. She plans to do part of her student teaching in England after her senior year and then spend two years teaching English in Japan. After a freshman year of "uncontrolled, unscheduled fun" Diane went on a "travel and transformation" mission trip to Central America during her sophomore year. This trip had a remarkable impact on Diane, shaking many of her assumptions about the world. In addition she describes the trip as "where my faith became my own; veered from that of my parents." Upon returning she began to explore issues of social justice and feminist theology.

Raised in a traditional Presbyterian home, Diane has now "embraced feminist Christianity." However, she often struggles to "mesh reality and my values together." She is concerned that this struggle may lead to "putting blinders on" for awhile, and wonders how people in Women's Group and others who know her feminist, activist side will react. Over the course of our interviews, Diane described several "five year plans" that included fields as diverse as medicine, community organizing, teaching and the

ministry.

MARGO: *"How can my faith be so different?"* (M-3-18)

Margo left a very close family to come to college. Her mother has undergone a series of operations for benign brain tumors, which have affected her hearing. Margo is thus very protective of her and spent many weekends at home during her first year of college. Most of Margo's questioning and shift from a traditional to liberal religious viewpoint had occurred during high school. Ellen, a female Christian mentor who worked with her "home church," was a very important role model and first opened Margo's eyes to feminism and social justice issues.

Though she started college as a pre-law major, Margo admits to having thoughts of a career in urban ministry as well. She declared Political Science and Religion as her majors, but soon decided against law school. Late in her senior year, Margo added a secondary education teaching certificate to her program. This will allow her to spend a couple of years teaching in an urban setting before seminary. She searched out the Center her junior year because she "needed a community at school." This community, however, had to be a place where her liberal political and religious views would be accepted. Margo jumped right in to the Center's activities; she helped plan retreats and became an active member of two groups. Her senior year role on the student leadership team was that of coordinating Worship, which provided her with good experience to take into the ministry.

ROSE: *"I've got a liberal streak and a conservative streak and they kind of hit at each other at times."* (R-1-16)

In high school, Rose rejected all religions out of anger at her father, who was dying of cancer. She describes this as a "rebellion." Rose admits that she often pretended not to hear religious arguments, but she was actually listening to the main points. Religion was fairly new to Rose as she started college,

and she had a difficult time self-identifying as Christian. Her freshman year, Rose became involved with both a very conservative Christian student group on campus and the Campus Ministry Center, with its liberal religious tradition. One of the most prevalent themes in my interviews with Rose was a sense of "needing a balance between her left and right": religious and political liberal and conservative views. The support of mentors through her questioning and doubting phases has been very important.

The summer before her senior year, she began "travelling churches" to find a place "where they really believe in the Bible." Her concern was that the liberal ministry of the Center, while important to her spirituality, was not nurturing the conservative side of her religious identity. By the end of her senior year, Rose was expressing her traditional views more clearly, though by choosing a conservative church with a woman minister, she felt as if she was still supporting a nontraditional approach to religion. After graduation Rose planned to find a job "somewhere" although she is not sure where or in what field. She has explored both a Christian job placement agency and the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program.

METHODS OVERVIEW

The overarching goal of this research was to understand how college women think about the process of faith development. This section will briefly outline the methods I used to achieve this goal. As described earlier, an interpretive approach was best suited to this intent. Among these approaches, the most appropriate for studying a topic such as faith is the use of descriptive narrative research (Polkinghorne, 1988). Guidelines from feminist methodologists such as Reinharz (1979, 1992) and Harding (1987) also influenced the progress of the study. The participants are "self-identified explorers," women who are reflective and interested in talking about their spiritual development in college. My interviews were guided by questions based on both faith and women's development literature. The open-ended interviews were audiotaped and included a "life map" task (Parks, 1980). The interviews and "life

maps" guided my exploration of the perspectives of each respondent. After each session, the tapes were transcribed. Interview notes, research memos and a journal helped trace my progress as a researcher through this process. Analysis was inductive, with themes and narratives emerging from the transcripts of the interviews. In addition, a female colleague served as peer debriefer.

Participants

The participants in this study, Diane, Margo and Rose, have already been introduced. These women were selected for this study through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). Kathryn helped me identify women who are "self-identified explorers," currently exploring their spirituality and who might be interested in participating in this study. When we first met in the summer of 1993, all three women were rising seniors, beginning to make plans for post-graduation. Over the course of the study, their plans changed, and only Rose graduated in May 1994. Diane is teaching overseas this fall, and Margo's change of major added at least 4 semesters to her college experience.

Preliminary Interviews

Previous to starting this research, I had been engaged in informal discussions about young women's faith development with several campus ministers. Based on our conversations, I decided to interview these sources before beginning the official interviews with the students. In early summer 1993, I conducted a series of preliminary interviews with campus ministers and seminary students from a variety of denominations (Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, and my own denomination, Unitarian Universalist). The goal of these interviews was to enhance my ability to ask questions of the women in my study. The campus ministers reviewed my proposed interview schedule and suggested additional questions. Carefully listening to their responses helped prepare me for the process of interviewing and listening to the women's stories about faith and spirituality.

Interview Procedures and Data Collection

Three official rounds of interviews were conducted with each participant. Conducting the interviews in rounds allowed me to focus specifically on one set of questions at a time. The tapes were then transcribed and read before the subsequent round of interviews.

I first met the three women informally, without tape recorder or questions in mind. Our preliminary meeting included introductions and an explanation of the study. Each filled out a short questionnaire to provide me with demographic and background data. In addition, this meeting gave them a chance to ask me any questions before we started the project. My first official interview was modeled after a "life map" exercise described by Sharon Parks (1980). In this exercise, the student was given a sheet of paper and asked to divide it into boxes for each semester and summer from just before the freshman year (Summer 1990) to the time of the first interview (Summer 1993). Then each box was given a title, as if it were a title for a chapter in her autobiography (Fowler, 1981). The student was given time to develop the titles and fill in details of her experiences (where she lived, significant relationships, academics, changes). This "life map" was then used to guide the student through our first interview. The map was also helpful in following interviews; when asked about changes over the course of several years, we referred back to the life map she had constructed.

The initial questions for the second interview emerged from reviewing the transcripts after the first interview. I found statements that needed clarification and asked for further information about ideas that were mentioned in passing. The life maps were used to construct the questions for the second round of interviews. From the maps, I also compiled a list of activities each had participated in since high school. Then, I asked the women to talk to me about how they chose to participate in those activities and whether the activities reflected particular values or beliefs. The final section introduced questions such as "how do you put meaning in your life?" and "are there any events that have affirmed (or shaken) your sense of meaning in life?" This set of questions proved to be the most difficult, but also the most interesting for

Diane, Margo and Rose to consider. As Rose said to me, "Oh Caitlin, this is the hard stuff!" In the third interview we revisited the questions about meaning. And finally, I asked each woman to define for me words and ideas such as: faith, religion, spirituality and prayer. Each described major elements of her faith and spirituality, and identified personally important symbols and rituals.

The three respondents were also given sets of typed transcripts from our interviews. We met on two separate occasions to discuss their reactions to the interviews and make any changes or corrections. Rose jokingly referred to one of our member checks as "Caitlin's Bible study" as we spent most of the time discussing where various verses were found in the Bible! Diane was particularly amazed at how much we had covered in the three interviews and how accurately she felt the conversations reflected her spirituality.

After completing the official interviews, I maintained contact with the three participants in this study. An additional type of data collection emerged at the beginning of the fall semester (1993). As I have mentioned before, the three women are active in Women's Group at the Campus Ministry Center. They invited me to the organizational lunch meeting of the group for the fall semester. I attended the first few meetings of the fall semester. Seeing the three women together, and observing the interactions among the group helped me to better understand the role of Women's Group in their lives. Attending Women's Group also made it easy to check in with them for updates. I was flattered when Diane asked me to help them coordinate a Sunday Worship, though I refused to "give a sermon"! Instead, I used material from our interviews to write an introduction about the role of Women's Group in the lives of its members and in the context of the Campus Ministry Center. Rose also put me on the mailing list at the Center; documents thus becoming another source of material for analysis.

A final interview was conducted just before the end of the 1993-94 school year. We talked about their senior year experiences and each shared with me her reactions to having participated in this study. I also attended the "Leaders' and Leavers' Lunch" at the Campus Ministry Center. This gave me an

opportunity for a formal farewell, and I gave each a volume of poetry about women's spirituality, as a thank you for sharing their own spirituality with me.

Data Analysis

As I began transcribing the first interviews, I found myself jotting down notes on scraps of paper. I listened for themes and phrases that were repeated within one interview or among the three women. After the first two rounds of interviews, I read the transcripts with different "lenses" (Tappan & Brown, 1989) for three particular stories: 1) the story of the Campus Ministry Center and how each woman became involved there, 2) the story of Kathryn, a feminist campus minister, in each of the women's lives, and 3) the story of Women's Group. I later went back through the transcripts to identify additional themes and definitions. For example, I found that each woman had a very different way of talking about her image of God. Pulling all pertinent segments together into one document allowed me to read and analyze that one theme across the three participants.

The most helpful process of the data analysis was what I've come to call "the one argument task." After several readings of the transcripts, I found myself overwhelmed with themes, ideas and stories. In an advanced interpretive inquiry seminar, we read a collection of essays from a similar seminar at Berkeley (Burawoy et al, 1991). One of the students described their writing process. Each paper was to be in a standard format of no more than 25 pages, and could advance "one and only one argument" (Hurst, 1991, p.200). I interpreted this as "OK, Caitlin, you have all this data. Now if you could only say one thing, or advance one argument, what would that be?" I walked around campus for several weeks mulling this over. Eventually, I was able to write a rough outline of what my one argument might be. This task helped me find connections between the many themes, and focus my analysis and attention. Additionally, creating tentative outlines helped structure my thinking about this project.

The process of data analysis in interpretive studies is ongoing and neverending. It has occurred

throughout the entire study, from listening to the first tape of Margo's first interview to now as I write the final product. After completing the official interviews, each transcript was read thoroughly without taking notes. This allowed the story of each woman to jell in my head. Later I read for obvious themes (prayer, faith, spirituality, religion) and others that had emerged during the process (image of God, feminism, the role of Kathryn). Going back to the literature has helped me organize the data that I have collected and rethink how each source fits into my framework and contributes to the analysis.

Peer Debriefer

A female colleague served as my peer debriefer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lynn is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology who is also undertaking interpretive research for her dissertation. She interviewed me using my interview protocol and exercises. In addition, we met frequently from March through August 1993 to discuss themes that emerged from the data and my reactions to interviews. Sharing ideas and reactions was very beneficial and helped me formulate themes and theories and clarify the stories I heard. Lynn diligently read every transcript, and felt as though she got to know Diane, Margo and Rose almost as well as I did! Debriefing served to process the information obtained in the study, and monitor my own reactions. I kept notes during our meetings and recorded and transcribed selected sessions. Lynn moved out-of-state in August 1993, yet we have maintained our debriefing relationship through electronic mail, telephone calls, and two visits.

NARRATIVES AS EXPRESSIONS OF EMERGING RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Having described the theoretical background and logistics of this study, I can now present an initial analysis of the stories shared with me by Diane, Margo and Rose. In this section, I will explore two of the ideas that will be further expanded upon in my dissertation. As I listened to these women over the past year, one of the similarities among the three stories was how each was developing a sense of self

as a feminist Christian woman. The other area of interest to me is the use of narrative, both as a valuable research methodology in higher education research and more specifically, as an appropriate method for studying a topic such as faith development.

Feminist Christian Women

My choice of focus on young adult spirituality is unusual from two perspectives. Not only are religion and spirituality rarely studied in our field, but the student development literature suggests that college is a time when traditional aged students either reject the religion of their upbringing or challenge its assumptions (Stage & Kuh, 1992). Much of this questioning takes place outside the traditional realms of organized religion. While many churches seem to accept this phenomenon, others have active campus ministry programs to provide a place for this questioning to occur.

Recently in the theological literature, there has been increased attention given to the spiritual development of women, with some of that attention focusing specifically on college women. One researcher found however that the younger women in her study were harder to understand and often less clear when talking and writing about their spirituality when compared with older participants (Randour, 1987). However, I found my three participants anxious and willing to explore these issues with me. At first, Rose did not identify herself as a very "faithful person" and wondered why I would want to listen to her stories. As she herself explored these notions, she came to see that she indeed was a faithful and spiritual person by her own definitions.

Diane, Margo, and Rose have just completed the rite of passage we call postsecondary education. On one hand, their narratives can be interpreted as traditional coming of age stories. But on the other hand, these stories have more to teach us as we hear these three college women struggling to understand the patriarchal legacy of the Christianity they grew up with. How do they integrate their emerging feminism with traditional Christianity? Instead of rejecting traditional religion, as both the student

development and theological literature would suggest, these three women worked to maintain their identity as Christian women. Although they are rejecting many of the traditional beliefs with which they were raised, they do not want to lose their entire religious identity. Each has found a way to integrate her emerging faith and identity into her understanding of traditional Christianity.

In a sense, Margo, Diane, and Rose are reinterpreting the stories of who they are as Christian women and what that means. Margo began challenging traditional Christian beliefs during high school. At that time, one of her mentors introduced her to feminism and social justice. These ideas intuitively made sense to Margo. In her search for a church community during college, she sought one in which these values would be accepted. Diane refers to these notions as "what we bring of ourselves into Christianity" (D-3-16). Through college she has struggled to "stay in the church" yet not become a "traditional woman," in her choice of major, relationships and her understanding of Christianity. Rose resisted the traditional Christian story throughout most of her high school years. But as she finished high school and entered college, she actively sought out information about Christianity. This information came partly from a conservative Christian group on campus and her liberal religious viewpoint was nurtured at the Campus Ministry Center.

These three women tell stories of how they have come to integrate the dominant, external perception of Christianity with their own internal, personal understanding of Christianity. The external traditional notions are represented in denominational stands, expressed by many ministers, and seen in the stereotypes students other students have of Christianity. Diane, Margo, and Rose express their personal ideas through stories of their faith journeys. These stories chronicle both physical and internal religious journeys through four years of college years, as they negotiate these two worlds.

Prior to coming to college, Diane and Margo were raised in traditional Christian homes, attending church and Sunday school. Margo began challenging the status quo in her community once she met Becca, a female Southern Baptist seminarian who introduced her to feminism and social justice issues;

she "brought [Margo] into realizing a lot of injustices around women's issues and stuff" (M-1-6). Though still active in the Presbyterian denomination, Diane refers to "the religion I had as a child" and the "faith that was introduced to me" as if these are distinct from her religion and faith today as a young adult. As mentioned earlier, Rose spent most of her high school years rebelling against her father's religion, but acknowledges that she was often listening to the arguments her friends presented in support of Christianity.

Student development literature suggests that for traditional-aged college students, coming to college often exposes a student to new beliefs and value systems. Margo loved this new "world view" and learned new arguments to support ideas that were intuitively correct to her. When Diane, Margo and Rose arrived at this secular university, their beliefs as Christians were often challenged. Diane mentions that she "knows" not to talk about the creation story in biology classes, or evolution with some of her conservative Christian friends. Christianity was so new to Rose that she was "hungry" for all the information she could gather. Later in college, religious studies courses provided all three women with exposure to new ideas and religious traditions. Being away from home also gave these women room to explore some of these new ideas, in an atmosphere that is generally supportive of questioning.

Because of the external perception of all Christians as fundamentalists, all three express some concern about being identified as Christians. Diane told me about one of her roommates:

> She has a lot of suspicions of me because I am religious. Outside the church I have to be careful because as a Christian, I'm perceived as an evangelist, fundamentalist, all those things, the "everybody-else-but-Christian-hater." And in the church I'm seen as a crazed liberal, so I'm very careful in any discussion I get in with anyone. (D-3-32)

Margo is also concerned about the religious right and questions the differing belief systems that fall under Christianity: "OK, I'm very far to the left, and so I have a lot of problems with the religious right, and how can I be a Christian if they're saying they're Christians?" (M-3-18). Rose also separates herself from this stereotype: "Therefore it bothers, no it scares me when other people recognize me as Christian because I'm afraid they're gonna view me as this closed-minded person, but that's not me. ... They don't know how much people differ in each religion" (R-3-17). Although they are each comfortable with their

personal Christianity, being labelled as such by outsiders makes them uncomfortable.

As these women continued their journeys through college, their traditional assumptions were challenged along the way. As Diane says, her "spiritual journey started with struggles of trying to make the religious values that I was being brought up with and the realize I was seeing around me, trying to make sense out of those two" (D-5-1). All three women came into contact with students of various religious and political persuasions, took Women's Studies courses, and were active in the Campus Ministry Center, which has an acknowledged liberal religious standpoint. For Margo and Rose, this journey took place internally, as they integrated new ideas into their personal theology. Diane's journey accelerated on a "Travel and Transformation" mission trip to Central America: "Central America is when my faith veered from that of my parents" (D-3-24). Through our interviews, I could hear Diane, Margo and Rose beginning to both vocalize and internalize some of the new ideas. Margo and Diane do not like to return to their "home churches" because of differences of opinion with their former ministers. Even Rose, with her conservative views, offers tentative critiques of traditional Christianity. For her, the most important thing is to have a place to question. Each of the women talked about their "needs" through this process: the need for information, for arguments in support of their new ideas, and for ways to discuss ideas such as feminism and social justice within Christianity.

Diane, Margo and Rose eventually began to express their ideas about Christianity in their own language and voice (Gilligan, 1982). I asked them to define terms for me such as faith, religion, spirituality, and prayer. Each was able to articulate their personal understanding, usually with a qualifier such as "before I came here this is what it meant" or "most people would say ... but I think." Redefining these critical terms assists in the creation of a personal theology. One example of a theme that emerged as each shared with me her understanding of spirituality was how each perceived God. Diane remembers vividly the day a feminist campus minister suggested that God might be female, which at the time was "way too scary" (D-1-12) a prospect. For Rose, her image of God changes, moving from the traditional

male view to a female perspective. One image that intrigues her is that of "being in God's womb ... envisioning yourself in the womb of God. I thought that was pretty cool" (R-3-31). Margo's God on the other hand, is "above pronouns" (M-3-21) and it "drives her crazy" when her roommate refers to God as "he."

In other conversations about spirituality, each woman expressed what was at the core of her personal theology. For Diane, a commitment to social justice and feminist issues is the most important. She "walks her talk" through activities in the Presbyterian denomination, and her choice of activities on campus and at the Campus Ministry Center. One Sunday when she spoke during a worship service she chose to emphasize living in community and her commitment to social action. Outreach to the community is also critical for Margo. Her plans to teach in an urban setting, then attend seminary so that she can do urban ministry reflect this commitment. At this time in her journey, Rose is most committed to her internal search. Her baptism took place during college, thus much of Christianity is still fairly new to her. However, Rose is committed to supporting women in the ministry. At one point she began "travelling churches" and mentioned that for a church to "feel right" it would need "the right music and a woman somewhere in the higher ranks" (R-5-3). She is also actively exploring feminist theology through reading and discussion groups.

These identities as feminist, Christian women are still emerging. Of the three, Margo seems to have the most established set of beliefs. She began exploring this identity during high school, thus has had more time to explore questions and contradictions. While Diane has "embraced feminist theology" she admits there are "some limitations on how far I can go with [my questions]. I'm going to have to take some things on faith" (D-5-12). There are also contradictions she runs into sometimes, either in her lifestyle or in scriptural readings. Her phrase "trying to mesh it all together" captures how these women work to integrate their understanding of Christianity with their lives and experiences. Rose also refers to "the things I go around on." These are often questions such as the image and gender of God, Christian

beliefs about homosexuality, and abortion. Rose is always working to balance her liberal and conservative views, both political and religious.

This process is one that Diane, Margo and Rose have not undertaken alone. There are several key people and settings that facilitate this process of negotiating an understanding between the external perceptions of Christianity and their internal beliefs. Female mentors have played a critical role in the journeys of all three women. Margo met Becca, her seminarian friend, during high school and became good friends with an older woman who taught a Sunday School class at home over one summer. Rose met with women in the conservative Christian student group to explore some of her questions. And like Margo, Diane remembers a woman at a summer church camp in middle school who took the time to answer her questions. And at the Campus Ministry Center, all three had the good fortune to work with Kathryn, a feminist campus minister. Kathryn led the trip to Central America that opened Diane's eyes to injustices. She also spent much time in one-on-one appointments with students pushing them to challenge their traditional beliefs. Kathryn also started an intergenerational Women's Group at the Center as a safe space for women to explore feminism and Christianity. All three of these women are active in this group. In addition, having a supportive worship community has been significant in the religious journeys of Diane, Margo, and Rose. The Center provides a space to question and challenge, and opportunities for social action and involvement in the larger community. Their home churches do not necessarily provide that same safe space; because of critical comments by her minister, Diane will not even attend her home church any longer.

For these three women, what it means to be a Christian is more than just faith in God and acceptance of Christ's teachings. Instead, each is working to integrate faith into every aspect of their lives. It is interesting to note that one of the campus ministers I interviewed observed that "as a whole, women integrate faith into their lives much more than men do" (Dan Case, personal communication, June 1993). Diane, Margo, and Rose were each active in many aspects of the Campus Ministry Center

community and its outreach programs, like volunteering at a local food pantry. They also took religious studies courses to further their knowledge of Christianity and other religions. Rose used Christian networks and placement agencies during her job search. Margo has decided to continue her commitment to Christianity and social justice by attending seminary so she can practice urban ministry. As she serves on committees in the Presbyterian denomination at the local, state and national levels, Diane voices her commitment to feminist and social justice issues.

Although Roof (1993) and others have found that young adults leave organized religion, these stories demonstrate otherwise. Diane, Margo and Rose are all working to maintain their religious identity as Christians while exploring feminism and other liberal religious viewpoints. I introduced this paper with a quote of Margo questioning "How can my faith be so different?" After many hours of interviews, she concluded:

> So you know, when I say that I don't understand how if those people are Christians I can be a Christian, but we do share some commonalities. We do believe in God and in Jesus as the child of God, and I guess we're supposed to say, you know, Jesus died on the cross for our sins and Jesus rose from the dead and went to heaven. So, yeah, I guess. I'm not sure all Christians believe that. but that is something I would share in common with the [religious] right wing. ...We do have the basics in common, you know? (M-5-6)

Even with "the basics in common," these stories demonstrate that the faith of young adult women is different. And it is important for those of us in higher education to listen to these stories so we can better understand our students.

The Value of Narrative

> All of us have a story to tell. It is the story of being human, of reaching for new understandings, of appreciating mystery, and of seeking wholeness, beauty, and truth. All we need to do is to ask, and to listen. (Randour, 1987, p.228)

For this research project, I asked, and I listened as three young women shared with me the stories of their faith journeys. Answers to my questions often emerged as stories, sometimes intentionally told with a cue to me such as "let me tell you about a time" and at other times, indirectly. Thinking about

narrative both as a way to structure a research project, and to listen and analyze the students' stories was valuable. I found narrative to be especially useful for understanding topics such as faith and spirituality. Although Rose sometimes expected my questions to be of the multiple choice type, all three women agreed that for this study, this method was more appropriate than a survey.

As discussed earlier, many social scientist have advocated the use of narrative as the most fitting way to understand how people make meaning in their lives (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986; Tappan & Brown, 1992). Feminist researchers often choose this methodology in the study of women's lives. In an article summarizing the works of Gilligan (1982), Belenky *et al* (1986) and other feminist scholars, Carolyn Enns (1991) notes:

> In an effort to understand the complexity of women's lives ... many of the models discussed in this article based their models on in-depth interviews and qualitative research methods. The literary narratives emerging from these studies provide rich data about the lives of unique individuals. (p.215)

The Personal Narratives Group (1989) is an interdisciplinary group of scholars all committed to feminist theory and the use of narratives as primary sources for analysis. In Composing a Life, Mary Catherine Bateson (1990) tells the stories of five women's lives, using a metaphor of music composition and jazz throughout.

Based on the readings above, and other descriptive narrative research, I chose to use this same method in my study of college women's religious identity. I also found that research was being conducted about moral development using these techniques (Tappan & Brown, 1989, 1992). These researchers found narrative to be a more effective means for adolescents to discuss and explore their moral choices than traditional survey methodology. With that in mind, it seemed to me that this advice could translate to topics such as religion, spirituality and faith as well. Dykstra (1986) has suggested that we consider the notion of "faith biography" rather than a structural stage conception of faith development and Leann (1988) suggests that we listen to people's "faith stories." Other researchers are also using narratives to explore these and other theological topics (Cooney, 1985; Ierardi, 1990; White, 1985).

Dan Wakefield (1988) shares with the reader his spiritual autobiography. Returning: A Spiritual Journey is often used as a model by groups of people wishing to discuss and write spiritual autobiographies. Women's Psyche, Women's Spirit (Randour, 1987) explores the spiritual journeys of over 90 women from a psychological perspective. And Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins travelled across the United States interviewing and listening to the stories of over 100 women. These narratives often uncovered many of the same themes I heard from Diane, Margo, and Rose.

As I reread the transcripts of my interviews with these three women, stories emerged. This did not surprise Diane, who found her words familiar when she reviewed her transcripts, saying "I've told these stories so many times" (D-5-1). Once Rose mentioned "I have an example" (R-3-17) and other times, she launched into a story in answer to one of my questions without realizing its narrative nature. Margo often told stories during our interviews, though she says "I don't consider myself a very good story teller" (M-2-19). She admires Kathryn's ability to share stories with important messages in her preaching. Margo admits that once she has "more life experiences" she will be able to make the same use of stories to convey a message. Faith and life stories also became an important part of Women's Group. At one point the group had lost its energy; Rose describes how stories were used to bring the group back together:

> We decided for us all to come in and tell our stories. ... I think everybody came in and had half an hour, 15 minutes telling your story and 15 minutes of questions. So we all got to know each other, learn more about each other. And that created more of a bond there and then we could feel freer to say things. Just knowing more about people makes you care more about them. (R-1-13)

One of the campus ministers I interviewed suggested that the most important function of her ministry is providing a space for students to have their stories heard (Mary Ann Macklin, personal communication, July 1994). In a sense, this research provided the same opportunity for these three young women. I asked them about their stories, and listened.

CONCLUSION

Although one of the guiding documents of student affairs work states that we ought to pay attention to spirituality as an aspect of the well-rounded development of students (American Council on Education, 1949), it is rare to find such attention in traditional higher education research. This is especially true in our work at secular universities. In general, theologians may have more invested in this type of research, and conducting such research at Catholic institutions (White, 1985) and other universities. However, there is much we can learn by listening to students' faith stories. Faith and religious identity are lenses that impact how a student approaches learning, and interacts both in the classroom and residence halls. According to the campus ministers I interviewed at a public university, more and more students are questioning their religious identities and seeking guidance through this process. Faith and spiritual development among students merits closer attention from researchers. And like much of the previous developmental research, the traditional models of faith development are subject to the critique of not having paid close enough attention to the faith development of women.

In addition, as researchers conducting qualitative research, we are encouraged to acknowledge our biases and assumptions before we enter the research process. Religious identity and spirituality are two additional aspects that we ought to examine before conducting any research. As stated in the Student Personnel Point of View (1949), there is more to student development than just the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual aspects. It is critical to examine the religious and spiritual aspects of student development as well as these more commonly recognized facets of development.

This research is also important because as a researcher, I asked, and listened to the faith stories of these women. Craig Dykstra (1986) has suggested that we consider faith biography instead of faith development. Voncile White (1985) also presented criticism of the structural stage theory of faith development and suggested that we listen to faith stories for themes instead of stages. Many of Fowler's research questions (Fowler, 1981; Mosely, Jarvis & Fowler, 1986) were extremely helpful in structuring

my study. However, instead of analyzing the resulting stories for stage placement, it is possible to listen to these narratives as stories of students' faith journeys. The narratives thus become a critical source of analysis in and of themselves (Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

One of the findings of this research was that for these three women, being part of a worship community with an active Campus Ministry Program was very important through their college years. As Margo said, "Without the church, I have no life!" These women have actively sought out a supportive spiritual community to support them through their questioning as their religious identities emerges as that of feminist Christian women. Although these three women are seeking spiritual support, this research suggests to me the value of other communities that can be created within our universities. Traditional student development research suggests that college is a time of questioning and often rejecting belief systems. It may be helpful to structure groups or communities where students can find support through this process.

This research has also demonstrated to me the value of narrative as a research methodology. While used in many of the social sciences, it has not been as widely applied in higher education research. Narrative research allows us listen to and understand students' lives, and is especially valuable for exploring topics such as religion, spirituality, and faith. Tappan and Brown (1989, 1992) have also found this to be true for researching moral development. With the current diversity of student backgrounds and experiences in higher education, students are less likely to fit into traditional models of student development. Narrative provides a way we can conduct research with a diverse student population on topics that may not be appropriate for traditional research methodology. Stories were used as a powerful tool to bring the Women's Group back together when it had started to disintegrate as a group.

And finally, the value of this research was best expressed by one of the participants. In our final interview, Margo reflected on the year-long process:

> I had to do a review with a board person over how things went over the second semester and then the whole year. And one of the questions we had to answer was "where, if you

> did experience spiritual growth, where was it?" Diane and I talked last night, and it sure wasn't with the student staff at all. And the only spiritual growth [for me] was doing stuff with you and looking back through the stuff. ... That really helped me! (M-6-2)

Margo's one comment, and knowing that the sentiment was shared by Diane, made this entire project worthwhile.

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